

# THE BRITISH 'SOCIAL PROBLEM' FILM: 'VIOLENT PLAYGROUND' AND 'SAPPHIRE'

BY JOHN HILL

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted *Daily Express*, October 10, 1958.

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<sup>2</sup> 'My Idea of Freedom', *Films and Filming*, September 1961, p. 24. John Grierson's remark that 'the British documentary group began not so much in affection for film per se as in affection for national education' can be found in Forsyth Hardy (ed), *Grierson on Documentary*, London, Collins, 1946, p. 140.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Sunday Express*, April 6, 1958.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Colin McArthur, 'Crossfire and the Anglo-American Critical Tradition', *Film Form*, vol. 1 no. 2, Autumn 1977. On the influence of the documentary movement, in this respect, see Alan Lovell and Jim Hillier, *Studies in Documentary*, Chapter 1, London, Secker and Warburg, 1972.

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IN 1959, the British Film Academy voted *Sapphire* the 'Best British Film' of the year. As with most awards, it is difficult to be sure of the criteria which have been applied in reaching such a judgement, but, in the case of *Sapphire*, it should be possible to make an educated guess. *Sapphire* was one of a group of 'social problem' pictures enjoying a prominence in the British cinema of the '50s. In particular, it was one of a series of such films to have been made by producer Michael Relph and director Basil Dearden. *Frieda* (1947) had dealt with anti-German feeling, *The Gentle Gunman* (1952) with Irish nationalism, *The Blue Lamp* (1950), *I Believe In You* (1952), and *Violent Playground* (1958) with juvenile delinquency. *Victim* (1961), dealing with homosexuality, and *Life for Ruth* (1962), dealing with religious fundamentalism, were to follow. What appeared to distinguish these 'social problem' films, and win them critical praise (such as the BFA award), was their determination, not just to provide 'mere entertainment', but confront 'real' situations and 'important' social issues, and, in so doing, make a positive contribution to the 'good' of society. A spokesman for Rank, the distributors of *Sapphire*, explained his belief in the cinema's 'tremendous influence' and the value of the film in promoting understanding of 'the problem' of race.<sup>1</sup> Michael Relph himself, echoing John Grierson's sentiments on the privileged role of documentary in the provision of 'national education', argued that because the cinema was 'genuinely a mass medium' so it also had 'social and educative responsibilities as well as artistic ones'.<sup>2</sup> A good example of such assumptions being put into practice was provided by *Violent Playground*: 40 boys on probation were taken along to see the film as a 'lesson on the futility of juvenile delinquency'.<sup>3</sup>

But what such formulations tend to assume, rather than argue, is both the positive social worth of such films and the unproblematic nature of the messages which they produce. What a film is about and what effect it will have (say, on 40 probationers) is presumed to be transparent, uncomplicated by the aesthetic conventions which such films employ.

Our 40 probationers are not so much watching a film as a series of events which might just as well be happening further down the street. As has often been noted, it is precisely this confinement of the aesthetic to the residual, the assumption that formal devices are no more than the neutral transmitters of meanings, which has consistently bedevilled so much of Anglo-American criticism.<sup>4</sup> By addressing the conception of a 'social problem', in general, and the aesthetic characteristics of the 'social problem' film, in particular, so I would hope to suggest one alternative to this traditional means of conceptualising both the nature and merits of the British 'social problem' picture.<sup>5</sup>

### The Social Problem Discourse

It has now become something of a commonplace for sociologists of deviance to argue that social problems as such do not exist.<sup>6</sup> This is not, of course, to deny that there is any such thing as juvenile crime but that there is nothing in the phenomenon itself which necessarily makes it a 'social problem'. For it to become so, it has to be defined or labelled as such. That is to say, a social problem is the product of discourse rather than the property of any particular condition in itself. What then becomes accepted as a social problem is not in any way inevitable but a consequence of the ability to have any particular definition legitimated, be it via the media, or other 'accredited agencies', such as the church, or through a mobilisation of the legal process, as in the case of the 1959 Street Offences Act which resulted from the 'moral panic' over the perceived 'social problem' of prostitution<sup>7</sup>. To this extent, the 'social problems' so defined are not so much the problems of 'society' as a whole as the 'problems' of those who enjoy the ability to universalise their particular point of view as the point of view of all in society. As such, the successful definition of a 'social problem' not only presupposes but also entails power. As Stephen Lukes suggests, power is to be understood not merely as an ability to secure desired (but possibly contested) ends; it is a 'socially structured and culturally patterned' phenomenon, relying both on selection (the ability to 'set the agenda') and suppression (the denial of the definitions and interests of others).<sup>8</sup> 'It is in this way that we can see how discursive rules are linked to the exercise of power; how the forms of discourse are both constituted by, and ensure the reproduction of, the social system, through forms of selection, exclusion and domination.'<sup>9</sup>

This is also so of the form which the conception of a 'social problem' assumes. Implicit in the logic of the designation of a problem is the idea of its solution. In effect, the definition of a 'social problem' presumes an ability to resolve it within the parameters of the social system: it does not imply structural change or social transformation.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the 'problem' of poverty implies a tinkering with living standards, not the transformation of a social structure whose constitutive principle is that of inequality. In a similar fashion, the conception of a 'social problem' tends to suggest its discreteness, or isolation, from more general social relations. The 'problem' of juvenile delinquency, for example, is defined

<sup>5</sup> The traditional approach to the 'social problem' film is also challenged by Richard Dyer, 'Victim: Hermeneutic Project', *Film Form*, vol 1, no 2, Autumn 1977 and Andy Medhurst, 'Victim: Text as Context', *Screen*, July-October 1984, vol 25 nos 4-5, pp 22-35.

<sup>6</sup> For a basic statement of such an approach, see Howard Becker (ed), *Social Problems: A Modern Approach*, Introduction, New York, John Wiley and Son, 1966.

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Carol Smart, 'Law and the Control of Women's Sexuality: The Case of the 1950s', in Bridget Hutter and Gillian Williams (eds), *Controlling Women: The Normal and the Deviant*, London, Croom Helm, 1981.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, London, Macmillan, 1974, p 22.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Young, 'Introduction to Michel Foucault', 'The Order of Discourse' in R Young (ed), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, p 48.

<sup>10</sup> This would also pre-empt a definition of social problems as 'contradictory' ie the effect of 'an opposition or disjunction of structural principles of social systems where those

principles operate in terms of each other but at the same time contravene one another' (Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, London, Macmillan, 1979, p 141). As Larrain suggests 'the concealment of contradictions' is one of the central operations of ideology (see *The Concept of Ideology*, London, Hutchinson, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> See Stephen Neale, *Genre*, London, British Film Institute, 1980, p 48; also see the difficulties produced by Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy's attempt to define the Hollywood social problem as a special genre in *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair and Politics from the Fifties*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981, p 8.

<sup>12</sup> Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1978, p 48.

<sup>13</sup> Russell Campbell, 'The Ideology of the Social Consciousness Movie: Three Films by Darryl F Zanuck', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Winter 1978, vol 3 no 1, p 60.

in relation to 'youth' in abstraction from the broader contours of class and gender division. As a result, the 'explanation' of 'social problems' can be more readily transposed onto the individual's personal qualities or 'natural' attributes: 'problems' are less the result of structural deficiencies or contradictions than personal inadequacies ('maladjustment' or 'psychological disturbance', for example).

## The Social Problem Film

It is within these general parameters that the role of the social problem film can now be understood. For it is the cinema, along with the other media, which performs an active role in the definition and institutionalisation of 'social problems'. Thus, the construction of moral panics about teddy boy violence and prostitution in the '50s were as much the responsibility of the media as any other agency. Moreover, the aesthetic conventions which the 'social problem' film employs are not neutral but enjoy their own determinacy in the definition of how such 'problems' are to be understood. Such conventions, however, are not exclusive to the 'social problem' film but are shared with mainstream narrative cinema in general. What is distinct in the 'social problem' film is not any set of exclusive characteristics (such as a specific iconography) but its specific mobilisation of more general conventions, especially those of narrative and realism.<sup>11</sup>

A central characteristic of the 'social problem' film, for example, is its adoption of the conventions of narrative as a means of sugaring the didactic pill. But, insofar as it is in the logic of classic narrativity to work towards a resolution of the initial narrative disruption, and thus bring the narrative to a close, so an attitude towards the 'social problem' is already presumed by the form adopted. As Seymour Chatman suggests, there is always a sense, in the traditional narrative, of 'problem-solving', 'of things being worked out in some way'.<sup>12</sup> To the extent that the film's 'social problem' is articulated into this problem-solving structure of narrative so is it also implied that it too can be 'solved'. As such, the discourse conventionally mobilised by the 'social problem' film is that of social control, the maintenance of social order by either assimilation or containment. The 'problem' of juvenile delinquency can thus be 'resolved' by either rehabilitation (*I Believe In You*), punishment (*The Wind of Change*, 1961) or destruction (*No Trees In the Street*, 1959) of the offender. In none of these 'solutions' is the social order itself put into question. There can, however, be a tension between these possible 'solutions'. Characteristically, it is the reformist solution, the capacity for social accommodation, which is stressed by such movies. It is for this reason that Russell Campbell highlights the capacity of the American 'social consciousness' film to portray negative aspects of American society while simultaneously confirming 'the possibility . . . of corrective action' and celebrating 'the system for being flexible and susceptible to amelioration'.<sup>13</sup> But, this is not always the case. Insofar as the 'problem' may prove too excessive, too defiant of assimilation, so the 'social

problem' film may fall back on the alternative 'solution' of direct repression. Thus, in the case of *Violent Playground* and *Sapphire*, the logic of reform which both films seek to embody is disturbed, even subverted, by eruptions of violence and sexuality which prove impossible for the films to contain save by force.

But while the social problem film may tell a story, it is also concerned that its content should not be viewed as purely fictional. To this extent, the anonymous enunciation characteristic of the 'classic realist text' is not a sufficient legitimisation of its claims to verisimilitude but must be extended through the use of documentary techniques (e.g. location shooting) and an appeal to 'factual' sources. Thus, *Violent Playground* ('obviously inspired by fact', according to *Kine Weekly*) was based upon the Liverpool Juvenile Liaison Officers Scheme while *Sapphire* adopted Notting Hill locations to underwrite its reference to the inter-racial riots of the previous year. But, insofar as such claims to 'facticity', to an adequate signification of 'reality', continue to rely upon the iconic characteristics of photography, so the cognitive status of their cinematic realism is dependent upon an epistemology of vision, an appeal to 'an empirical notion of truth'.<sup>14</sup> The guarantee of 'truth' (internally organised by the narrative meta-discourse rather than measured against some external standard of truth) ultimately resides in what we can see.

In terms of an understanding of social problems, however, the implication is to suppress those elements not directly accessible to vision, but which nonetheless have their effects upon the empirical. For example, it is possible to show how the poor live on the screen. It is rather more difficult (remaining within the conventions of realism) to demonstrate how such poverty is the effect of a particular economic system or socially structured pattern of inequality. It also helps throw light on Russell Campbell's complaint that social consciousness movies repress 'social and political dimensions' in favour of 'private, personal dramas'.<sup>15</sup> For not only is individualisation implicit in the conventions of narrative whereby it is individual characters (and very often one central character) whose desires and ambitions structure the story's forward flow, but also a consequence of the conventions of realism with their dependence on the 'empirically' observable and hence the inter-personal rather than structural.

Insofar as the social problem film is capable of extending its 'explanations' of social problems beyond the inter-personal this tends to be the responsibility of dialogue. But, to the extent that it is a characteristic of realism to privilege the image over the word, so the social problem film's reliance on dialogue as a means of making 'general' statements which go beyond the particularity of the story may be rendered problematic. As Colin McCabe suggests, 'contradictions' between what we see and what we hear are conventionally resolved in favour of the image.<sup>16</sup> What I want to suggest, however, is that the subordination of dialogue to the visual is not always so straightforward as his example from *Days of Hope* suggests (i.e. the undercutting of the mine-owner's speech by the image of troops at bayonet practice). Thus, in the case of *Sapphire*, the tension between what we are told about racial prejudice, as expressed by the

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<sup>14</sup> Colin McCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian theses', *Screen*, Summer 1974, vol 15 no 2, p 8. On the iconic sign, see Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1972 and Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981.

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<sup>15</sup> Russell Campbell, op cit, p 57.

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<sup>16</sup> Colin McCabe, 'Days of Hope - A Response to Colin McArthur', *Screen*, Spring 1976, vol 17 no 1, p 100.

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dialogue, and what we actually see is not explicitly structured as a discrepancy, as in the case of the example from *Days of Hope*, but the rather more complicated failure of the conventions adopted to substantiate the message which the film's dialogue would seek to secure.

### Violent Playground

Both *Violent Playground* and *Sapphire*, then, are 'social problem' films, conceived as interventions in contemporary social debates and marked by a concern to promote 'rational' and reformist solutions to the 'problems' of juvenile delinquency and racial prejudice. In both cases, however, the preferred discourse of rationalism is upset and rendered problematic. Thus, in the case of *Violent Playground* the ostensive liberalism of its reform position begins to crumble, finally giving way to a logic of punishment and repression.

To a large extent, this is structured by the film's choice of conventions, in this case, those of the criminal investigation, which effectively circumscribes the film's discourse on the prevention of juvenile delinquency within the confines of crime detection and solution. Thus, while CID (Criminal Investigation Division) man Truman (Stanley Baker) is taken off the case which initiates the film (an arson attack), it is through his transfer to Juvenile Liaison, by bringing him into contact with Johnny (David McCallum), that the crime is able to be solved. In this way, the focus on prevention does not so much displace the process of law enforcement as temporarily suspend it. As such, the ideology of reform represented by the work of Juvenile Liaison must ultimately surrender to the requirements of the law and order position, of bringing to justice, implicit in the investigation format.

How this works out in detail can be seen in relation to the film's two main characters, Truman and Johnny. Truman is a bachelor, scathing of psychology and a firm believer in discipline (or 'walloping them'). As he himself puts it: 'I don't even like kids. I'm clumsy. I'm tactless. I'm brutal.' His transfer to Juvenile Liaison thus sets in motion a process of humanisation. Through his contact with the Murphys, he begins to understand the problems imposed by bad housing and broken families while his contact with the school headmaster, Heaven (Clifford Evans), and the work of the youth club develops an appreciation of the virtues of a liberal educational philosophy (particularly, in its effects on the two Murphy youngsters). Thus, by the halfway stage of the film his attitudes have undergone a dramatic reversal. He admits to no longer thinking like a policeman, takes exception to a colleague's reminder of his earlier disciplinarian prescriptions and successfully inverts the complaint, initially made against him, of being 'a bachelor' by using it as a reprimand against an angry stallholder, the victim of a juvenile theft. Meanwhile, his own bachelor status is at risk through a developing romantic interest in Kathy (Anne Heywood).

In this respect, the film's movement is logical and accumulative with the experiences undergone by Truman marking a re-emphasis on





Romantic interest in *Violent Playground*: Truman and Kathy.

prevention rather than punishment. But it is a re-emphasis of only limited scope. For what haunts and ultimately undermines this rational march forward is the position occupied by Johnny. Catherine Belsey has noted how the process of 'scientificity', of explicit rational deduction, in the Sherlock Holmes novels is 'haunted by shadowy, mysterious and often silent women' who elude and ultimately subvert the detective's project.<sup>17</sup> The role of Johnny is similar. By virtue of his associations with violence and 'irrationalism', his presence is consistently marked as a threat, deflecting, eluding and ultimately undermining the project of reform which the film would seek to endorse.

Johnny is introduced with his back to the camera as an emblem of the diversionary role he performs in distracting from Truman's successes with his younger brother and sister: first, by his assumption of the film's attention on their arrival at the flats and, second, by his interruption of the conversation between Kathy and Truman once inside the flat. Kathy, Johnny's elder sister, is educating Truman in the wiles of young Mary (Brona Boland). Just as she asks whether he is now 'beginning to understand', Johnny appears in the rear of the frame, upsetting the composition's symmetry. A cut to Johnny refocuses attention onto him, as he now assumes compositional prominence and takes command of camera movement. In so doing, Truman's acquisition of 'understanding' is brought to a halt: 'It's no use talking now,' announces Kathy. Once outside, he finds himself confronted by a gang of menacing youths, appearing as if from nowhere as the camera pulls back. Although allowed to pass (by virtue of an instruction from Johnny), the scene concludes with Truman alone and isolated in the frame, made small by the shot's high angle. The subsequent fade-out seems to mark, in turn, the darkness beginning to engulf his aspirations.

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<sup>17</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, London, Methuen, 1980, p 114.

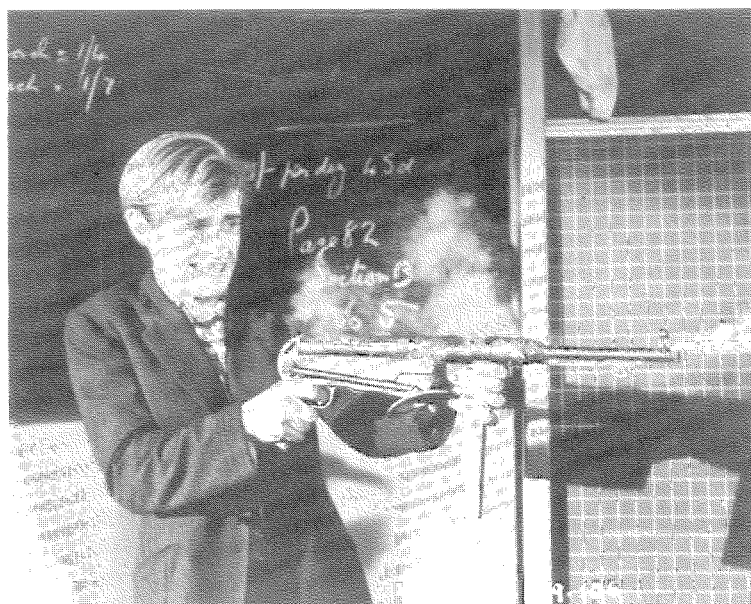
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Signs of understanding or rejection: sports (top) or dancing.

The decisive blow to Truman's ambitions also occurs in the flat. At first, it would appear that Truman is making some headway with Johnny, when their discussion at the sports field suggests the beginning of a mutual understanding. Their return to the flat, however, successfully negates what progress has been made. Inside the flat, Johnny's friends are engaged in a wild and frenzied dance. A dancer is seen from the joint point of view of the two men. A cut back to Johnny and Truman





Violence as inevitability: Johnny's last stand.

suggests another point of view shot of the dancing to follow; in fact, the film now cuts obtrusively to the rear of Johnny's head, overcast by a dark line of shadow. The men's joint point of view is dramatically fissured, with Johnny's back turned defiantly against both Truman and the camera. Johnny then throws down his jacket, turns up the wireless and joins the dancing horde. The main beneficiaries of reform, the twins, are meantime revealed imprisoned behind a clutter of table and chairs. As with so many earlier Dearden films (e.g. *Cage of Gold*, 1950, *Pool of London*, 1951, *I Believe In You*, 1952) it is this world of music and dancing which upsets rational order and control through its release of the primal and dionysiac. As Jonathan Simmons suggests, 'It is the rock music which changes Johnny from a reasonably mixed-up kid into a savage, dancing to the tribal beat, all his animal instincts let loose from the thin veneer of civilisation.'<sup>18</sup> Inevitably, the stage is now set for a full-scale eruption of the dangers the music has released: Johnny returns to arson and ends up waving a gun (significantly kept in a guitar case).

With this escalation of violence the film's logic of reform begins to crumble and the demands of authority begin to take over. As Truman explains to Kathy, 'You can feel too sorry for Johnny.' Accordingly, Truman informs the CID of his suspicions about Johnny and receives a kind of absolution from the local priest who promises to tell Kathy that 'you had to do your duty.' Back at the police station, the Chief Inspector (George Cooper) reinstates a law and order position, assuming a compositional prominence that temporarily removes Truman from frame: 'Haven't we had enough of these crazy mixed-up kids who go around bullying and ganging up on people, beating up old ladies? ... I'm a policeman. I've got respect for the law. I know it isn't fashionable. But let's spare a thought for the old lady. Not just for the old lady but you

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Simmons, *British Youth Problem Features of the 1950s*, unpublished MA Thesis, Polytechnic of Central London, 1983, p. 67.



<sup>19</sup> Stan Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1980, p 95.

<sup>20</sup> cf the remarks of Cohen, *ibid*, p 16: 'Each society possesses... a set of images of who constitutes the typical deviant... is he an innocent lad being led astray, or is he a psychopathic thug?'

and yours. If these children want to try living outside the law then they can pay the price at the court. I'm tired of tough-guy fever... sick and tired of it.' But, perhaps, most strikingly of all, Heaven, who had previously denied the existence of juvenile delinquents ('they're only juvenile') and shown contempt for the 'rules and regulations' embodied in the fire-door must now also change his mind and explain to the twins 'a rule's a rule'. The only place left for Johnny then is inside the police van. 'Deviants must not only be labelled,' writes Stan Cohen. 'They must be involved in some sort of ceremony of public degradation.'<sup>19</sup> So it is now for Johnny. 'It's right that he should go in a black van,' comments Truman. 'It's right that people should see him go in there. It's right that Patrick should see him go in there if only to stop him going the same way.' Johnny as such cannot be saved and, as the black van draws into a crowded street, must serve as an exemplary sacrifice for the good of the community.

As a result, the film is torn between voluntarism and determinism in its account of delinquent behaviour. By emphasising the cultural heterogeneity of its youngsters – at once English, Irish, Chinese and Jamaican – the film effectively undercuts the early emphasis on environmentalism. Thus, Truman is able to inform Johnny 'you are what you want to be'. Even in the film's own terms, this is clearly not the case. Johnny, for example, attempts to enter the Grand Hotel (with its Rolls Royce clientele) but is, of course, debarred by virtue of age and class. But rather than focus on the real disadvantages suffered by Johnny, the film opts for psychopathy instead. Johnny cannot assume full moral responsibility, not because of environmental circumstances, but because of the compulsiveness of his own psychoticism (rooted in a childhood experience of fire-fighting). As such, he is fated by forces which belie rational control. In this respect, the film's appeal to religion is more than coincidental. The innocent/psychopath duality of delinquent demonology is now effectively supplanted by the good versus evil Manicheism of a Christian theology.<sup>20</sup> Truman reveals his parents to have been shepherds. Kathy kisses the palm of his hand and makes her way inside the church.

The damage which this now causes the film's perspective of reform seems to be partly recognised as the film inserts a concluding coda whereby the basic propriety of its reformism can be reinstated. In doing so, it merely underlines the repression underlying its notion of reform. This ending reintroduces the young black boy first seen at the film's beginning, when he had ignored the reprimands of Truman concerning the way he walked: 'Kids don't walk no more, they jive.' His subsequent reappearance, calling to Truman and then taking his hand, is clearly intended to be read as a sign of Truman's success. But, apart from its obvious contrivance, this reconciliation is hardly on equal terms. For Truman has moved no nearer an understanding of the boy's own culture and vitality. The boy, now walking 'properly', has merely submitted to Truman's terms.

Like *Violent Playground*, *Sapphire*'s contemporary subject matter (rising immigration, the Notting Hill riots) and social concern is intertwined with an investigative structure. While this structure provides the veneer of 'entertainment' felt necessary to hold an audience's attention, it also embodies a number of the film's values. For the principle of rational deduction upon which the classic detective formula is based in turn embodies the spirit of rationalism which the film wishes to apply to the problem of racial prejudice. In this respect, the end of the detective is not just that of crime-solution but a moral mission as well. Cawelti has suggested that such a missionary aspect to detection derives from the 'hard-boiled' detective novel, as represented by the work of Hammett and Chandler.<sup>21</sup> But, whereas this is seen to result from a greater personal and emotional involvement with the criminals on the part of the detective, in *Sapphire* the detective remains aloof from his suspects in a manner more akin to the classic detective story. As such, the detective is not changed in the course of his investigation (cf. *Violent Playground*) but begins from a moral position which it is then his task to enjoin upon others. The moral authority which the detective thus represents is that of a white, middle-class and heterosexual male and derives solely from his superior rationality. In this respect, the tension between inquiry and action, fundamental to the detective story, is balanced in favour of inquiry and, in particular, discussion between characters. The aesthetic emphasis of the film is thus the conventional shot/reverse shot structure with its focus on reasoned discussion. It also sums up for the film what is, at root, the cause of racism: racial prejudice. This does not imply a socially institutionalised form of oppression, but rather an attitude of mind amenable to change through argument and an appeal to reason.

Such a disavowal of the social dimension and accompanying focus on individual attitudes is reinforced, like *Violent Playground* before it, by the heterogeneity of characters with whom Superintendent Hazard (Nigel Patrick) becomes involved. Such variety establishes the class differences within both black and white communities and emphasises the reciprocity in racial prejudice of blacks towards whites. Thus, the black community includes the wealthy son of an African bishop and barrister, Paul Slade (Gordon Heath), the respectable black professional, Dr Robbins (Earl Cameron) and the semi-criminal elements associated with the Tulips club and with Horace (Robert Adams). Moreover, as Slade makes quite clear, racial prejudice works both ways. His father would not have allowed him to marry Sapphire, because 'she was part white'. But what, above all, clinches this removal of social and economic division is the film's ultimate reliance on an ideology of nature.

This is not made explicit but crucially underpins the film's investigative logic. The film begins with Sapphire's body falling to the ground: the reverse shot which would identify the murderer is, however, withheld. Although it is the identification of the murderer which it is then the work of the investigation to solve it is, in fact, the identity of the victim which consumes much of the investigators' attention and finally

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<sup>21</sup> John G Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, University of Chicago Press, 1976.

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'Who was Sapphire?' Inspecting the victim's petticoat.

provides the key to the crime's solution. Two scenes underscore this. In both cases, the two policemen, Hazard and Learoyd (Michael Craig), inspect items of Sapphire's clothing. In both cases the discovery of exotic clothing (a bright red taffeta, a nightdress) is marked by an eruption of colour into otherwise muted settings and suggests an enigma yet to be resolved. Insofar as Sapphire is revealed to be a 'half-caste', Learoyd suggests that the 'red taffeta under a tweed skirt' indicates the 'black under the white'. Hazard's response is to warn him to 'come off it', but what we see, rather than what we are told, renders suspect Hazard's rational perspective. The logic of the film's *mise-en-scène*, exploiting the novelty of Eastman colour, is that the coloured characters should add 'colour' in a more general sense. As Dearden explained: 'My idea is to throw all this (the sombre winter backgrounds) into contrast with the sudden splashes of colour introduced by the coloured people themselves. The things they wear, the things they carry, their whole personality.'<sup>22</sup> This elision of skin colour with personality is significant. For it is precisely the effect of the film to expand the connotations of colour to the 'colour' of music and dancing, sexuality and violence (and hence motivate the fetishistic fascination of the detective for Sapphire's clothing with its suggestion of 'exotic' sexuality).

This becomes clear in one pivotal sequence. As has been suggested, the resolution of the crime which precipitates the film's plot is in turn dependent on a solution to the question of Sapphire's identity. Hence, the importance of the clues implying Sapphire's 'other side' (the clothes and torn photograph) and leading to the sites of her 'other life' (the International Club, Tulips). The explanation for these is then provided by the revelation of Sapphire's life as a 'half-caste', passing herself off as white and thus attempting to hide her 'blackness'. The argument of the

<sup>22</sup> *Kine Weekly*,  
December 25, 1958,  
p 15.



film, made at the level of dialogue, is that 'you can't tell' the difference between white and half-caste. Saying so, as Sapphire's doctor argues, is as 'silly' as identifying a policeman 'by the size of his feet'. But, once again, what we are told is subverted by what we actually see (the empirical notion of truth upon which the film relies). Pam Cook employs the term 'pregnant moment' to denote those moments in a film when the ostensive ideological project of a film is undermined.<sup>23</sup> The scene occurring at Tulips suggests something similar.

The two detectives have entered the black club, Tulips, in an effort to identify Sapphire's dancing partner, the missing half of the torn photograph. The owner, Mr Tulips, claims to have no knowledge of Sapphire and, as he returns the photo to Hazard, observes Learoyd's outward gaze. Cutting to Learoyd's point of view we see an apparently white woman dancing in 'ecstatic abandon'<sup>24</sup> (as ER Cousins' novel of the film puts it). 'That's a "lilyskin"', comments Tulips as we cut back to the three men. A further point-of-view shot now reveals the young woman to be dancing with a black man, Johnny Hotfeet. Returning to the three men, Tulips continues his comments, 'Your chick was a lilyskin, wasn't she. . . . You can always tell . . . once they hear the beat of the bongo.' At precisely this moment, bongos can be heard on the soundtrack, and the camera moves down and forward, past the three men, onto another apparently white woman sitting behind them, as she begins to tap her feet. Learoyd observes the rapturous expression on her face before another eyeline match initiates a rapid montage sequence of 20 shots, all loosely conforming to the point of view of the three men. Cutting between the 'lilyskin' dancer, her partner Johnny Hotfeet, a black woman dancer, Johnny Fingers, the 'white' woman behind the men and the bongos, concludes with direct sequence-intercutting between low-

<sup>23</sup> Pam Cook, 'Approaching the work of Dorothy Arzner' in Claire Johnston (ed), *The Work of Dorothy Arzner*, London, British Film Institute, 1975, p 14. The term is derived from Roland Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein' in Stephen Heath (ed), *Image-Music-Text*, Glasgow, Collins, 1977.

<sup>24</sup> E R Cousins, *Sapphire*, London, Panther, 1959, p 115.

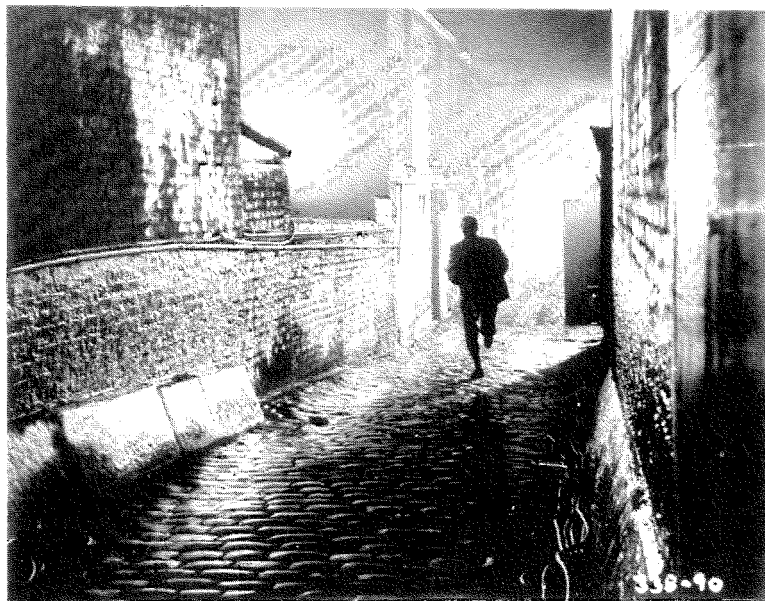


Tulips, a site of Sapphire's 'other side'.

angle shots of the 'lilyskin's' pants and thighs, revealed below her twirling skirt, and close-ups of the bongos.

Formally, the scene confirms the British cinema's taste for sub-Eisensteinian and 'crudely emotive' editing techniques, noted by Dyer<sup>25</sup>. Like the similar scene in *Violent Playground* it also marks a 'descent' into music and dancing, now explicitly interlinked with sexuality by the use of low-angle shots up the dancer's skirt (with its reference back to Sapphire's red taffeta). And just as Truman had been confronted with an explosion of forces, apparently at odds with his project of rational control, so now is Hazard. Up to this point, it has been his position that you 'can't tell a lilyskin'. With this scene, it would appear that you can. For once the 'beat of the bongos' begins, the 'white' women do indeed 'give themselves away', as Tulips suggests. As if to emphasise the point, the last six shots of the scene directly intercut shots of 'white' women dancing with close-ups of the bongos. Significantly, when we cut out of the scene it is to shots of Tulips and Learoyd, not Hazard. It has been Learoyd's position throughout the film (and the apparent sign of his bigotry) that you can always tell. The cutback to him, rather than Hazard, thus seems to underline the displacement of Hazard's position that has occurred and temporarily constructs an identification with Learoyd rather than the 'rational' Superintendent.

Such a setback would seem to be confirmed by the scene which follows. As Johnny Fiddle (Harry Baird) flees the club, what had previously been a sedate enquiry transforms into a frenzied chase through the dark, wet streets of the city (reminiscent of *noir* in its choice of compositions and lighting). Johnny's attempts to find a hiding-place foregrounds the themes of sex and violence, running together the ideas of sexuality and criminality in the process. He is evicted from the white,



Shades of *film noir*: the chase.

working-class café, Joe's: 'We got copper trouble too . . . but we ain't got your sort of woman trouble. So get out and stay out.' Continuing his flight, he is then set upon by a group of teddy boys. Although undoubtedly taking its cue from the Notting Hill riots, in the context this explosion of violence stands entirely at odds with the reason the film is seeking to espouse. That such 'meaningless violence' should be the climax to the 'ecstatic abandon' of *Tulips* is, in the film's terms, hardly coincidental.

The resulting perspective on race with which the film concludes is thus something rather different from the one that is espoused by Hazard. Like Douglas Sirk's American film of the same year, *Imitation of Life*, the root of the 'half-caste's' problem is less racism, or even racial prejudice, than passing themselves off as something they're not. In Sirk's film, the answer is to abandon the circle of deceit, or 'imitation of life', in favour of an acceptance of black identity. But, while Sirk views this as a progressive position, presaging the upsurge of the blacks' civil rights movement, it nonetheless traps black people into an ideology of nature, an 'essentialism' in which nature becomes destiny.<sup>26</sup> While *Sapphire* does not have *Imitation of Life*'s appeal to black solidarity, it does in a similar way confine its blacks, as 'essentially' different (rhythmic, sexual) and determined by nature ('lilywhites' really can't escape the beat of the bongo). To this extent, the film ends up confirming the very prejudices it would seek to subvert. For its ascription of natural qualities is, of course, not natural at all but the projection of its own culture's values, values which form part of the problem not a solution to it.

Indeed, read according to one light, the film itself comes close to suggesting this. Contrary to most expectations set up by the movie, the killer turns out to be the sister of *Sapphire*'s white fiancé. As Dyer has pointed out, the 'unfulfilled woman' (unmarried and/or childless) is a frequent culprit in the social problem pictures of the period (*Lost*, 1955, *Serious Charge*, 1959, *Victim*) and Milly (Yvonne Mitchell) can be seen to conform to this category.<sup>27</sup> Although married, and with children, she is nonetheless the victim of a joyless marriage to a seaman who 'doesn't seem to get much leave . . . or doesn't want it'. In this respect, Milly's relapse into hysteria makes sense. Hysteria was, of course, a recurring preoccupation of Freud's, conventionally identified with women and understood as the symptomatic transcription of repressed sexual desires.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, as Hoch suggests, the sexual mythologies surrounding blacks may themselves be understood as the externalised embodiment of internally repressed desires.<sup>29</sup> In effect, Milly's hysteria is the complement to the explosion of black sexuality at *Tulips*, just as her act of murder had been provoked by *Sapphire*, pregnant and 'swinging her legs' before her. In a way, this is the irony at the heart of the movie. For the locus of violence is not in fact the blacks but the respectable white middle-class family home. The real danger is not the threat without but the sexual repression that's within.

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<sup>26</sup> Jon Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1971, p 130: 'The imitation of life is not the real life. . . . The girl (Susan Kohnner) is choosing the imitation of life instead of being a Negro. The picture is a piece of social criticism. . . . You can't escape what you are.'

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Dyer, op cit, p 18.

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<sup>28</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, pp 77-78 and Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix*, London, Macmillan, 1982, pp 42-48.

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Hoch, *White Hero Black Beast: Racism, Sexism and the Mask of Masculinity*, London, Pluto, 1979, p 54.

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## Conclusion

Concluding his remarks on the treatment of anti-Semitism in *Crossfire*, Colin McArthur registers his alarm at how 'the processes of the production and understanding of meaning have been naturalized to the degree that they are no longer . . . grasped on a conscious level.'<sup>30</sup> If this is so of an 'anti-realist' film such as *Crossfire*, he suggests, how much more likely will it be of films made within a realist and/or naturalist aesthetic. But, of course, just as the 'social message' of *Crossfire* cannot be divorced from the conventions in which it is embedded, so do the conventions employed in the 'social problem' film play an equally active role in the production of meanings. And just as these may as much subvert as confirm the 'social message' of a film like *Crossfire*, so is it also the case with the 'social problem' film. This is also true of the relationship between film text and social context more generally. For while it is impossible to make 'sense' of the 'social problem' film independently of more generally available social discourses (be they concerned with juvenile delinquency, race or whatever) this does not imply that such discourses are unproblematically reproduced in the cinema. As John Ellis suggests, the film text 'may take for granted certain meanings, certain assumptions, but it exists to take risks, to work through ideological problems . . . ideological meanings . . . are not reproduced so much as refreshed, not so much repeated as reworked.'<sup>31</sup>

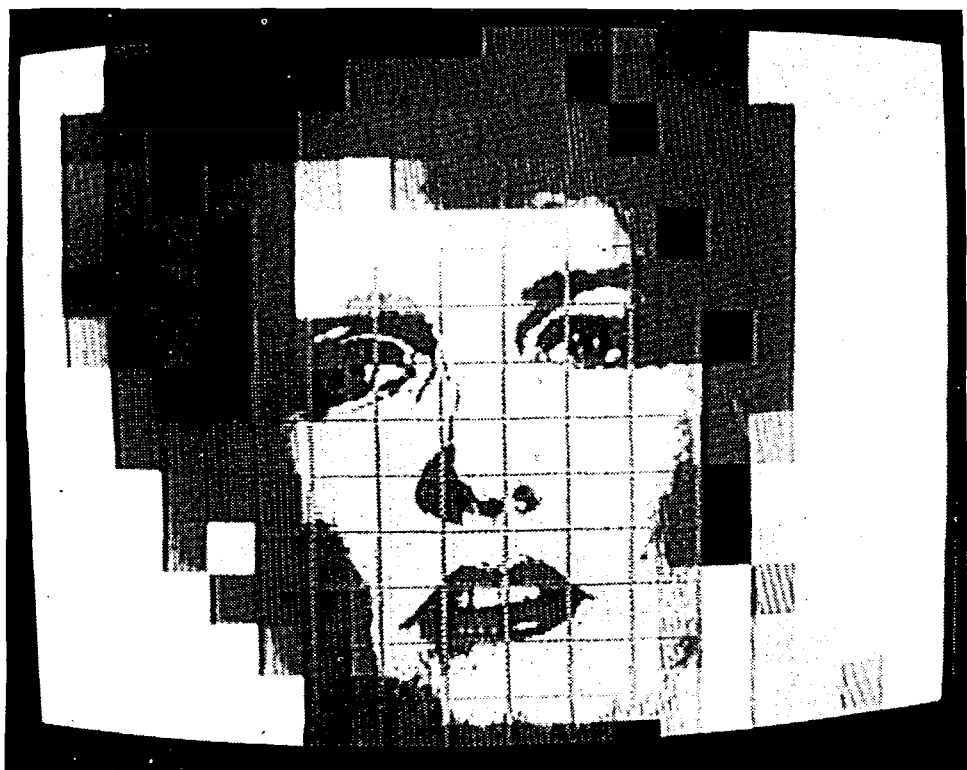
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<sup>30</sup> Colin McArthur, op cit, pp 31-32.

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<sup>31</sup> John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, p 74.

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